THE MUSIC BUSINESS

FREE

AND HOW TO AVOID IT

APS 002

INTRODUCTION

The first thing to be said is that this isn't intended as a critique of the state of the music business - the biz - as such. We're not really interested in the specific aspects of the biz today, nor why certain fashions have emerged in recent years. What we are interested in is looking at how the biz reflects and reinforces the takeover of our lives by trivial things, and how this process stops us thinking about what we really want to do. Further, by seeing how our day to day experiences can help illustrate the ways in which the biz turns creativity into a Top 20 'hit', we hope to offer some suggestions as to how the diversion of new music - that is, music being created now - can be avoided. So we're not trying to tell you what is or isn't correct; rather, we're try trying to point out that alternatives to the current organisation of music exist, and that these alternatives are, we feel, more satisfying for those who decide to indulge in them.

theory blah blah

Music as a False Reward (i)

Life today is magic, well worth it. And if, occassionally, things don't go quite so well, don't worry, there's always tomorrow. But if only....

- if only we didn't have to do such dumb tasks for such dumb wages, or battle with the welfare, merely in order to survive.
- if only there weren't supermarkets like assault courses, shopping centres like neon concrete mazes.
- if only we didn't have to press a button and wait for an electronic beep to tell us it's asfe to cross the roads without getting killed.
- if only there wasn't so much crap on the tv/in papers and magazines/on the shelves of shops/on hoardings.
- if only things didn't fall apart within a year of buying them.

However, things can't be perfect. And anyway, we can always go down the pub, see a film, buy some clothes, play space invaders, or go down our local record megastore. That's what makes it all worth it - isn't it?

Music as Idolatry and Fanaticism

It's surprising how many people consider themselves to be vaguely part of the music scene, yet whose sole involvement consists of watching what other people do.

Some of the more extreme cases are the hardcore fans. These people will know everything there is to know about their heroes: when hob-nobbing eith other fans, obscure pieces of information will be swapped, like magpies exchanging trinkets. They will undoubtedly have as many things connected with their heroes as possible - records, tapes, clippings, magazines, t-shirts, badges, posters, calendars, patches, etc; the reasons for acquiring these things being that they are associated with their idols, not that they have any merit in themselves (although it's possible to argue that these tokens don't have this latter quality anyway). They will organise/attend socials, they will run fanzines. They will fill their homes with assorted tacky souveniers and clutter connected with the object of their worship. In fact, they will do everything except attempt to do anything original themselves.

The stupidity of the more ridiculous aspects of such obsession is immediately obvious to all those but the fans themselves. For instance, we laugh at the Barry Manilow fans who queued for hours in Brighton merely to glimpse his leather tour jacket. However a lot of the behaviour of the fan is regarded as quite normal. For example, the purchase of rip-off records, tapes, badges, posters, tour tickets, etc; the painstaking emblazoning of bands' logos (now being produced by design consultants in order to create a 'brand image') on the backs of jackets; the slavish examination of the self-styled music press (written by people who think they're important for people who think the music press is important) and pop programmes (presented by 'personalities' and watched by their novices); and the obsession with the positions of various stars in various, all important, charts.

It's just an extension of ideas about performers and audiences - do-ers and watchers - to all areas of life. We think we're sharing a life with musicians, poets, artists, and visionaries, when in reality we're merely identifying with a mish-mash of images created by executives at EMI, Virgin, CBS. We think we're doing something original, when in fact we're watching something artificial. However such is the nature of this society that such a back-to-frontness in reality is regarded as the normal state of affairs.

What is not regarded as normal is the behaviour of people who attempt to create music for themselves.

Music as Fashion

It's also in the nature of this society that things must always be seen to be getting better. After all, that's what 'Progress" is all about. However, things can only get 'better' by being seen as an improvement on what went before. The function of fashion is to provide this false sense of Progress. A need is created for something fundementally useless by making it fashionable. After a brief period of exploitation it is made unfashionable by being replaced with a new fashion. Through the process of fashion the new-novelty is labelled desirable, while the old-novelty is labelled undesirable. Thus what is currently in the realm of fashion acquires a sense of inevitable rightness, while what recently occupied this realm is exposed as a shallow, ridiculous fraud. How could anybody have considered wearing anything like that?

Fashion is everywhere - from quiz shows to political parties, from trousers to antiques, from cars to relationships, from hifi to yoghurt. For various reasons - perhaps because it's based on a high turnover, and also because of it's media exposure - the music industry is more fashion prone than most. The rate of turnover of fads and cults is gradually increasing. Music fashions are, at the moment, becoming shorter and shorter, and less ans less distinguishable (and distinguished). Blink and you've missed one. Whatever happened to...?

The biz manipulates fashions on several levels. Firstly, there are the long term movements - teds, rockabillies, mods, hippies, soul, psychedelia, reggae, glam rock, disco, punk, funk,new romantics, electro/hip-hop, etc. Secondly there are smaller sub-movements within these movements, important to those inside, but indistinguishable to those outside. Both these areas of fashion reflect the characteristics we've already talked about, having their own scenes, sub-scenes, cults, fanzines, dress codes, etc.

It's difficult to see how the biz could create long term fashions. What appears to happen is that these movements start off locally, and only when the reach a certain level of activity are they 'found', firstly by alternative capitalists such as City Limits, and then by the record companies. If they're thought to be commercially viable they're then bought up, packaged, and resold back to the people they came from. The crucial point at this stage is that control over the development of any movement is transferred into the hands of big business - the record companies. Once a movement has become established - ie it sells enough units to command media coverage - a curious thing happens. The paraphernalia originally generated by each movement - language, clothes, attitudes. images. etc - having become the property of capital, acquire

the characteristics of consumer goods, and as such cease to depend on the original movement to give them meaning. Years later punk fashions appear in Miss Selfridge.

It must be said that these things haven't acquired a new meaning; rather having taken their place on the shelves of the cultural supermarket, they have acquired a sort of meaninglessness, waiting for the consumer to give them significance.

Then, not satisfied with becoming independent of the cults which generated them, these meaningless items then attempt to spread their control back to the movements from which they arose, so much so that the movements become defined and imprisoned by them. And as these items are sterile, so the movements become sterile: they become fossilised, encased in a strait-jacket consisting of record companies, journalists, t-shirt and badge manufacturers, etc. Movements come to be seen in terms of what the papers decide to write, and what the record company decides to sell. It's a bit like trees in the tropical rainforests which support vines which, in turn, grow to cover and ultimately strangle the tree.

Music as Hip Capitalism

For the enlightened amongst us who have managed to suss out the total falseness of the mainstream biz, there is a refuge in the 'alternative scene' (an appropiate description if ever there was one). Here at last, we proudly tell ourselves, is something genuine, something new and original we can turn to. Sure, if we want to enter a necropolis stuffed with self-defined avant gardists - experimentalists, ritualists, metal bashers, subliminalists, synth twiddlers, and general assorted mystifiers. These people try to convince us that because what they're offering us is different and not easy to understand, they must somehow have access to hidden/subversive knowledge, in the light of which their apparently irrational behaviour becomes rational. This knowledge can be ours, too, if we buy their (expensive) product.

Much more 'overground' - hardly 'alternative' at all - is the wackily boring alternative cabaret circuit which, these days, appears to be increasingly run by the young'n'trendy wing of the Labourious Party (nuff said, eh?).

There is, of course, little to separate the hip capitalists from everybody else. "But at least it's an alternative", whine those who pretend to reject the biz, but who are in reality hopelessly addicted to its' total monotony. Big deal. These people also reckon there's a difference between watching Channel 4 and BBC1, voting Labour instead of Tory, or reading the Guardian instead of the Sun.

Music as Radical Activity versus Music as Industry

It seems that there are always whiffs (sometimes clouds) of gossip hanging over the biz. No doubt these contribute towards keeping people fascinated with, and thus willing to buy the products of, the biz. But why should the biz be romanticised in the public eye? Why should making money for EMI be seen as rebellious? We would guess that in an age where things and their production and consumption, assume the status of deities and rites, anyone engaged in what is seen as 'unproductive' activity is regarded as being faintly subversive. This delusion is a reflection of peoples' belief in the naturalness and normalness of this society, and in the neutrality of forms of social organisation - "things were meant to be this way".

For people who accept this society as a given state of affairs - that is, those who don't acknowledge the existence of other possible forms of social organisation - the world of 'production' appears as something completely and naturally different from the world of art. However, this society can also be viewed as a highly specific form of organisation, where the main motivation is the pursuit of power, and the main sedative is a tinsel disneyland stocked with useless novelties and gadgets. In this case the underlying organisation of both 'industry' and 'art' appears to be precisely the same: the production of geegaws to keep us quiet.

However, this similarity is almost totally obscured and ignored. So much so, that the biz - whose managers use the jargon of business, such as turnover, units, profit margins, economic viability, investment, loss leaders, etc - is still seen as a scandalously bohemian area of activity. Even where these connections are explicit, they're ignored. For instance, at the recent British record industry awards, special trinkets were given to Elton John and Wham for opening up new markets in Russia and China respectively. The presenter of these awards was none other than Norman Tebbit, who gave a stirring speech on the benefits of free enterprise, which everyone cheered.

The confusion is perpetuated by, of course, the music press, with its tales of artistic angst, tour escapades, personal philosophies, studio anecdotes, etc, side by side with ads for the products of various multinational corporations. There is, however, no doubt about which side of the biz we, the punters, like to see - for what our dull little lives need are a splasn of colour. If we're bored, there's no need to worry, we can always get excited over what other people appear to be doing. But then, from the point of view of those in charge, it's always better that we consume the disney reality presented by the biz, and live through the fabricated fantasies of media myths. This way, we don't attempt to think for ourselves.

"White riot/I wanna riot/White riot/A riot of my own"
Like fuck. The only riots the Clash ever witnessed were those where hordes of their worshippers threw money at them in return for the privilige of wearing Clash t-shirts. Upon the release of their first lp in the US, CBS redesigned the 'anarchy' of the sleeve so that the Clash logo was moved from the bottom to the top. This was to catch the eyes of American consumers who, faced with having to flip through rack upon rack of product, have been found in tests to have only looked at the top quarter or so of each sleeve.

Music as Lifestyle

One persons' lifestyle is another executives' target market. Buy the record, wear the clothes, read the magazines, do the dance, get the haircut.

But music doesn't just contain lifestyles; it is itself becoming part of a range of all embracing lifestyles - roller skates, pizzas, hifi, gyms, computers, films, designer watches, walkmans, hamburger bars, club holidays - where the emphasis is on fun, whatever the cost (in mental as well as cash terms). Enjoy yourself, or appear uncool. After all, everyone else is having a good time, or at least they appear to be (social paranoia - everyone's having a much better time than you are).

That this aspect of music - as part of a lifestyle - has only recently been recognised for exploitative purposes by the biz (with the exception of the Beatles in the 60s?) is somewhat intriguing. Possible historical factors include rising disposable income amongst those still at work; cheaper technology and gadgets; and, importantly, the rapidly increasing (but sterile) use of video in a general media explosion aimed at getting people to consume things. Start 'em young.

Whatever the reasons, changes are occurring. While pop music has long been used to advertise consumables, the consumables are now available in the megastores. Now it's possible to buy not only records, tapes, etc, but stereos, computers and software, tvs and videos, paperbacks, holidays, clothes and pizzas. The buzzword is diversification; but the reality is the generation of a seamless facade which appears to show the world as a place where everyone is happy, and enjoying the fruits of Progress. The trouble is, people get so preoccupied with trying to be everyone elses' notion of 'happy', that they simply fail to notice the difference between the idea and the real thing. It's like we're all holding masks in front of our faces. Peering through them, all we can see are other peoples' masks, which convinces us of the rightness of continuing to hold our own masks in place. Other people, seeing our masks, continue to hold theirs in place. We're all trying to chase a socially generated

mirage of 'happiness', and by these actions convince other people that they ought to be chasing the mirage, too. But because mirages can never be reached, we have to spend all our lives running.

Music and Progress

We've already noted that the process of fashion is vital to the biz. We've also noted that three consequences of fashion are: (a), the increasingly high rate of turnover of styles, each of which is treated by the biz as an exploitable market; (b), the increasing meaninglessness and sterility of these styles; and (c), the generation of a feeling of numbness and passivity as all the little 'colourful' fashions blur into a grey wall of monotony.

However, the use of fashion by the biz also helps to underpin an unspoken but vital legitimising characteristic of the biz: that is, that the biz actually makes music qualitatively better, that it is providing a public service by making so many wonderful things available to the lucky punters. This is part of a myth of Progress that runs through all of this society. This myth implies that Progress provides good things, and that Progress is in itself a desirable thing. It also implies that society is Progressing towards a Golden Age, provided we all do our bit (although it seems to be a Golden Age we never quite reach). It's a self validating myth. For instance, one of the more Progressive things today could be seen to be compact discs. Their ultimate uselessness is not considered; instead people say, "Compact discs, being a result of Progress, must be pretty good things". Simultaneously they also say, "Progress, having provided compact discs, must be a pretty good thing". In other words, Progress is 'good', therefore the fruits of Progress are 'good'; and as the fruits of Progress are 'good', Progress must be 'good' too.

The construction of a facade which implies that things are permanently nudging towards some kind of inevitable technological Garden of Eden, does much to hide the real business of the biz, that is the production of brainwashing boredom. However, one of the disadvantages of always promoting product that is labelled 'new' and 'revolutionary' is that when people find out that what they've bought is the same as what they bought last year or last week, and definitely not some final solution (ha!) to their day to day misery, a certain disenchantment is experienced. In the long term, the biz can only counter this disappointment by promising even more brightly coloured toys, which in turn cause more disappointment when it's found out that they, too, are only made from plastic. The harder they come, the harder they fall, and the harder the biz has to work in order to maintain the illusion of its' own necessity. But as the rate at which promises are made, and seen through, and replaced with more elaborate promises, gets quicker and quicker, so the 'reality' the biz offers us merges into itself and becomes a meaningless pattern of dancing baubles.

About the only things which do progress, are the quantity of trivial things in circulation, and the state of numbness and passivity of our minds.

Music as Culture

Culture is creativity done 'properly'. It is the inversion of creativity. What is desirable is what follows the rules, and is therefore re-creation rather than creation; while what is undesirable is what breaks the rules and explores new territory. Only where the new can be explained in terms of what already exists will it be admitted to culture. There has to be a reason for everything. That way, the interests of those already in control of things are protected against those who would ignore them and start to think for themselves.

Music as a Production Line (i) - The Components

As a car passes down the line from welder to painter to engine fitter, so music passes from the artists to producers to album designers, until it plops off the end of the line and into the megastores. A desire to conform (for profits' sake) on the part of everybody leads, predictably, to predictability. There's a limit to what you can do with standard components. 'Modern' automated car factories can be programmed to produce endless variations in model specification; but can anyone really tell one Ford Sierra from another?

Music as a Production Line (ii) - Mass Production, Mass Consumption

We're told that one of the benefits of this society is a greater than ever 'freedom of choice' for the lucky consumer. This 'freedom' is based on the 'power' of the consumer to decide what to buy, and consequently to force manufacturers to respond to the punters' needs. However, as we would expect by now, we find that in the biz (as with everything else) the total opposite is true. Rather than our expectations determining what is produced, what is produced determines our expectations. Thus not only is music produced, but also a climate which demands more of the same. What appears is good: what is good appears.

Music as a Profession

Most professional musicians are accomplices to the lie that things have to be done properly to be valid. They're aided and abetted by the biz which, by elevating its' production units (its' stars) to god-like status, turns their skills into supernatural talents. Music is something mere mortals shouldn't participate in; these things are best left to people who know what they're doing. So there's not point doing anything unless you can play an instrument, have a pile of expensive equipment, record everything in studios, and release it as a proper record in a proper sleeve. Is there? No - it's far better to sit back and pay the people who set these standards to do things for you. It's best not to get involved.

The situation is complicated by all the budding rock stars about, who try their hardest to convince themselves and everyone else around them of two things. Firstly that their goal is to 'make it', as if the only way they'll feel they have any artistic worth is when they've been processed by the biz and have taken their place in the pop supermarket alongside all the other bozos. Secondly, that the only way to go about 'making it' is to play like a proper band, hopefully in imitation of existing stars (especially their heroes), and in general play along with the bizs' rules. Such people do much to counter any anti-biz initiatives which manage to struggle through, and as such are more dangerous to the survival of music than any record company executive. The biz doesn't have to control us when we control ourselves.

Music as a False Reward (ii)

In the shops, 'new' goods appear on the shelves magically, as if the store owners had kindly decided to make these wonderful items available to us, in order to brighten our dull lives. We have little or no awareness of their production process, which includes design and marketting as well as physical production. They just appear. Consequently they aren't seen as the products of exploitation; neither are they seen as being designed to con us into buying what we don't need, in order to stop us from asking for what we really want. Indeed no. Instead they are presented as beneficial, the physical reality of the 'good life' we are all told is the reward for knuckling down to things in the first place. In short, what it is hoped we will think is that (for example) chocolate flavoured yoghurt has been developed, at great cost, for our benefit; and not to (a) make profits for the food company, or (b) prevent us from asking ourselves why we ever felt we needed chocolate flavoured yoghurt in the first place.

So, with record shops, especially megastores, we find ourselves in a sort of Santas' Grotto which promises us all but reveals to us nothing of the purposeful structures behind the fairy lights and tinsel. Like all shops. it seems we're faced with an overwhelming choice (that's Progress); but, of course, it's the choice between Tweedledum and Tweedledee, between Ford and Volkswagen, between Sony and Phillips. Again, goods appear magically. If we do have any knowledge of how they arrived in the racks, it's usually limited to myths floated about in the music press, eg how a particular star came to write a particular song after a particular mystical experience. What's definitely not stated is why, for instance:

- Record producers and engineers manipulate sounds to make everything fashionable and marketable.
- Sleeves are designed to sell product.
- More and more groups employ designers to create brand images.
- Richer bands employ industrial consultants to try and create unique identities (e.g. logos, colour schemes) which will sell any object which incorporates them

which incorporates them, such as sports bags, watches, etc. It's instant access

which incorporates them, such as sports bags, watches, etc. It's instant access to millions of primed consumers.

Music as a Ritual

The megastores can act as one of several locations - temples - for the enactment of one of the basic processes - rituals - underpinning our society, that is: exchanging that which we have been given for producing, for things produced by others so they might buy things too. This process splits our world into two: into a world of production, and a world of consumption; a world of work and a world of 'leisure'; a world of denial and a world of reward.

The record store provides one of the focal points where the divided up parts of our lives are allowed to interact. After queueing like sheep we reach the checkout, where we part with often considerable sums of money for the latest, shiny, glossy package of 'music'. Only when we get home do we realise, faintly, that we've been conned, that despite all the hype what we've bought isn't all it's cracked up to be. The trouble is, while we'll admit to a lot of things, we hate admitting to being conned. So we'll go around telling everybody else how wonderful our latest acquisition is. Similarly no-one will admit to us that they've been conned. We're all fooling each other.

This applies to all things that are bought for the wrong reasons, that is as a reward for putting up with things. They always turn out to be shitty - smaller than the picture on the packaging/in the magazine/on the tv. It's because our expectations are too high; not necessarily because we believed the claims of the advertisers, but because we feel there ought to be something more exciting to make life worthwhile. However, despite the expected disenchantment, the actual process of acquiring shitty things appears to have a peculiarly powerful hold on us. Like religous zealots, who go from one sacrement to the next in the joyful knowledge that they have renewed their feeling of piousness and holiness, so we go on regular expeditions to collect our pathetic little baubles, the possession of which makes our commitment to slavery - because we're always saving up for something - so much more bearable.

Top of the Pops

Top of the Pops is showing all the time - we just don't recognise it for what it is, that's all. But on TOTP:

- A band is famous for three minutes - then the next sensation appears.
- Bands pretend to play spontaneously, while miming to artificiality.
- Audiences are herded from set to set. There's always something new to look at. The illusion of going somewhere covers up the reality of going round in circles.
- Audiences are shown how to enjoy themselves by professional enjoyers. Professional enjoyers are cool, sexy, trendy, beautiful. They wave flags and balloons, wear silly hats, and lead the singalong bits. They dance, while others merely shuffle, and they're always happy. They're what the audience wishes to be.
- Audiences are told what's going on by those friends of the stars, the djs, 'personalities in their own right and thus superior to the audience. (The reason why radio 1 djs are so wacky is that the BBC doesn't pay as well as commercial stations, so more has to be earned through personal appearances at discos, beauty contests, supermarket openings, etc. Thus they spend as much time promoting themselves as they do the record company product.)
- Everybody knows that a good time is obligatory.
- The audience is tol what's vital and what isn't - although it appears that the audience, as a reflection of mass opinion, have told the shows' producers what's vital and what isn't.
- Everything that appears must be seen to be sensational; so if there is no obvious reason for an act to be seen as such, the djs make one up - 'new entry', 'climber', 'expensive video', etc. The djs can make the audience believe anything, because the audience believes in the djs.
- The show's become increasingly dominated by videos; presumably while you watch the pretty pictures, you'll forget how cruddy the song is.
- The show's producers, having realised that records are becoming more and more boring, and that the audiences' concentration span has become almost totally non-existent, have given over large parts of the show to 1 minute extracts from various videos. However, this attempt to introduce a bit of variety merely has the effect of emphasising how much the same everything is.

But the main problem with Top of the Pops is, of course, that everybody wants to be on it.

FOR pop artists, being as good as their last record may now be irrelevant. Radio has traditionally been the spawning ground for chart activity, and airplay is still important. But increasingly, pop's practitioners are having to pay attention to visual style and presentation. Television appearances and exposure of promotional videos are becoming critical as TV becomes increasingly enamoured of pop programming. The trend in publishing is away from so-called serious music papers towards ever-proliferating teenage magazines, where high quality colour, layout and design are often more important than the accompanying text. Pop artists must look the part whether they like it or not.

"The whole of pop music's becoming more visual than aural," according to designer Malcolm Garrett. "It's as though the pop industry is taking over the status that the film industry had, where film stars were media people. You thought of them as people rather than as what their performances were in any particular film."

Garrett studied graphic design at Manchester Polytechnic, and has become one of the best known packagers and image-makers in the pop industry through his work with a long list of artists, from the Buzzcocks in the Seventies to more recent and more spectacular successes with Culture Club and Duran Duran. Since his student days, Garrett has cherished an ambition to apply the principles of corporate image and identity to pop groups, where each and every manifestation of an artist — a record sleeve, a T-shirt, a badge — would be clearly identifiable as part of an overall design scheme.

With Duran Duran, Garrett has come close to realising his ideal, producing record sleeves, books, shirts, badges, brochures and even a board game for the group, all stamped with the logo of his company Assorted Images. As he became more successful, Garrett went into partnership with Kasper de Graaf, with whom he'd worked on a now-extinct magazine called New Sounds, New Styles. By a mixture of ingenuity, energy and blarney, the pair have begun to diversify into several related areas — management, books, decor

"If you don't take the opportunity offered by record sleeves, merchandising all these other things in which you can express yourself, you're in danger of projecting an image by default," says de Graaf.

This all begins to make selling records and building an image for a pop group sound very similar to simple advertising, with any cultural aspirations left by the wayside. An internationally successful act like Duran Duran has more in common with a large corporation than it would like to admit.

Across London from Garrett's Assorted Images are the offices of Peter Saville Associates. Saville, a contemporary of Garrett's at Manchester Poly, came to prominence with his design work for the Manchester independent record label Factory, and in particular with the group Joy Division. For him, the disadvantage of the pop music industry is that fast turnover counts for more than artistic excellence.

"You don't want to do disposable, short-term graphic design, and actually that is what the music business needs," Saville muses. "The system's not going to pay more for quality of work and it's not going to change its ways because of you."

Like Garrett, Saville has been concerned to create a systematic design for all the areas a pop act can find itself involved in.

In spite of some disillusionment, Saville acknowledges the creative freedom the music industry offers. "You can actually get away with behaving in a very self-indulgent prima-donnaish way. You're not working to a brief of any sort. You're using your own imagination to fill some space."

The encroachment of style over content in pop has generated new opportunities for people with an assortment of talents. Creative Workforce was the brainchild of club-land entrepreneurs Steve Strange and Rusty Egan in collaboration with publicist Carol Hayes, and it provides an umbrella for 20 or more photographers, choreographers, make-up artists, hairdressers, stylists and illustrators. In different combinations, Workforce members might find themselves involved in fashion shoots for magazines, making pop videos, directing photo sessions for press use or sleeve artwork or developing stage designs for a group's live show.

"It's quite a new part of the business really," says make-up artist Lynne Easton, who divides her time between fashion and beauty assignments and work with glittery pop names like Wham!, Spandau Ballet, Culture Club and Frankie Goes to Hollywood.

Can a record be sold by artwork and photography, or a group's career founded on graphic designer Gill Mumford fears this could be the case.

"I think a lot of people are so superficial they buy things to match their wallpaper. A good record sleeve definitely helps to sell the record. I was reading about the cover for the Rolling Stones' Exile on Main Street. They reckon that album didn't sell very well because nobody liked the cover.

"It's all about lifestyle. If somebody is interested in dressing really smartly they'll find a cover with guys in the best brogues or the best Italian suits, and they'll check all the details like whether they've got button-down shirts and Italian haircuts. If they like the outfits they'll be much more inclined to buy the record."

Selling an image has possibilities far beyond pop music. Assorted Images' Kasper de Graaf can't see why his company shouldn't tender for an account with, for instance, British Airways, who entrusted their recent image-overhaul to an American company.

"Some of these big British companies ought to be noticing that the innovations in packaging and design and so forth over the last seven or eight years have been in pop music in Britain. There are lots of other really good artists around the world but for corporate identity and all that implies, Britain is where it's at."

practice tinkle bang

One of the main ideas discussed so far is that we're prevented from doing anything ourselves by the ideas planted in our heads by everyone with an interest in keeping things as they are, who say it's best to watch things, and not to interfere except on their terms. So in a bid to give some constructive advice, instead of just moaning on about how bad things are and finishing off with a few slogans, here's a sort of very basic 'Interference Manual'. Vaguely similar guides were put out by bands in the 70s, but all seemed to assume that you'd need £700 or whatever to pay the record pressing plant. So this is a guide for everybody who

- can't afford instruments, let alone studios and pressings
- can't play 'properly' anyway.

(This isn't the alternative to the problems discussed above, it's just the way we've gone about it).

PLAYING

Improvised Instruments

Look in skips, use your imagination. If you put your mind to it, almost anything can be made to produce a sound, and after these sounds have been mangled by the recording 'techniques' discussed below, you should wind up with something pretty interesting. Try:

* tins, for hitting, rattling things in, etc
* bottles. Blow across the tops, tap wwth sticks, fill with water to different levels to give different notes.
* large metal drums, buckets, cardboard boxes, for banging.
* drumsticks made out of skip wood.
* tubes come in all sizes, made out of metal, cardboard or plastic. They can be blown, banged, clattered, bashed, slapped (like bongoes), clanged, have noises made down them, etc.

  (A note on blowing technique. If you purse your lips, and bring them together, while blowing out through them, you'll get a sort of raspberry noise. Pull your lips in bit by bit, and you should get, with a bit of luck, a sound like a mosquito. Do this down the right sort of tube - smallish dimeter metal or plastic ones seem to be the best - and you should get a trumpetting sound. Practice.)

* Metal tea trays full of nails, cutlery, or whatever.
* Large bits of tin foil waved about.
* Shakers made with beer bottle tops loosely nailed back to back on a stick.

'Proper' Instruments

From jumble sales, toy departments, begged, stolen, borrowed. It's not really our aim to get hold of the latest chip loaded gizmos. However, we do have:

* a descant recorder (a wooden one, which has a nice sound) Recorders are cheap, and easy to learn. 'Learn to play' boks are easily available. Also, tin whistles, fun and cheap.
* 2 melodicas. They look like keyboards you put in your mouth and blow. The 'Bontempi' (£3 from Woolies) is a good one.
* an acoustic guitar, borrowed. It's tuned (sometimes) to an open chord, which means that when you strum it, it plays a tuneful chord without you actually having to put your fingers anywhere. To get different chords, you just move your fingers up and down the neck, parallel with the frets (if you don't understand this, get a guitar playing friend to show you). We hope to get a really knackered electric guitar as cheap as possible, and treat it with total disrespect.
* tambourines, cheap'n'cheerful'n'plastic, from toy shops.
* whistles, kazoos, tooters, etc.
* a xylophone, 99p from the co-op.
* kiddies toys, rattles, etc.

And that's that. Go go go!!! And you don't just have to do it yourself, get a load of people and junk together, and get going. It's good fun, even more so when nobody can 'play' anything.

(Any more ideas gratefully received).

RECORDING

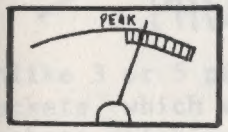
Recording's done on tape recorders. Simple, eh? Well. there's several sorts of tape recorder, with different ways to input sounds. It all depends what you can lay your hands on. Sources include what you can borrow, jumble sales, charity shops, ads in local papers.

Reel to Reel Recorders.

Old reel to reels have valves, and are quite large and heavy. They usually have 5" or 7" spools. We have three, all of which use external (rather than built in) microphones. On one machine, the mic socket is a large plug socket, for large plugs. The second has a 5 pin socket (for 5 pin plugs), the third a 3 pin socket (for 3 pin plugs). So you can record through microphones provided they have the right plugs.

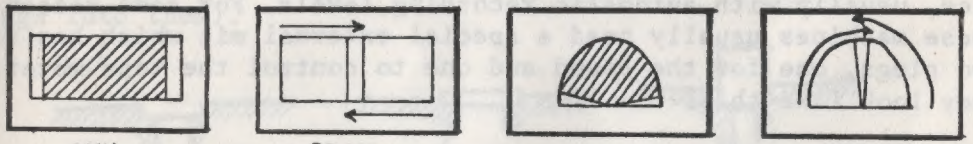
The 3 and 5 pin sockets can also be used to input signals direct from another machine. To do this, they have to be connected with leads with the appropiate plus at either end. (leads can be got from electrical shops).

Recording Levels. This is done automatically on one machine, one has an automatic/manual switch. one is manual. With manual recording settings, we usually set the level to a point just below the maximum. So with vu meters, signals should peak just into the red, while with moving light meters signals should peak where the lights just cross.



VU METER: needle swings from left to right (min to max)

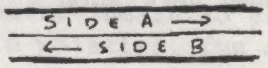
MOVING LIGHT METERS:



Speed Changes. The larger reel to reels can have two or three different speeds for the tape. So sounds can be slowed right down, e.g. by recording at full speed, playing back at half speed and recording that at full speed on another machine, playing that back at half speed, etc. Slowed down sounds soon get bassy and wierd.

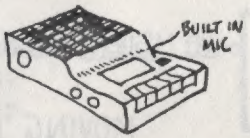
Amplifying. The machine with the large plug socket will play whatever goes in through the socket out through it's speakers. So, for instance, by taping a mic to the back of an acoustic guitar, you get a different sound. Lots of feedback can be got by pointing the mic at the speakers. Mics can be taped to loads of things, but it's best to use cheapo ones.

Backwards Noises. Mono reel to reels have two sound tracks, on one in each direction. One machine has a little button which lets us switch from one track to another, although we only hear one at a time. As the tape continues in the same direction side B will, in this case, come out backwards.

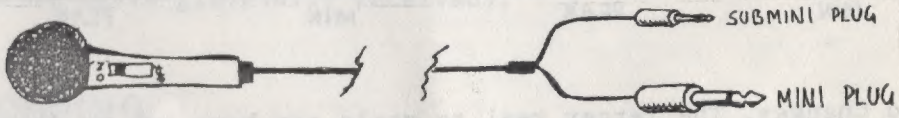


Variable Speed Noises. On the transistorised reel to reel, pressing the pause button lets us move the tape over the heads by moving the reels around by hand. Variable speed frontwards and backwards noises result, rising and falling in pitch with the speed at which the reels are twiddled.

Cassette Recorders.

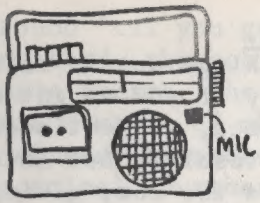


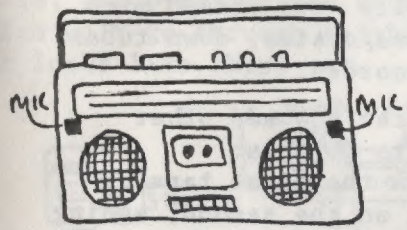
Mono. The tidgy ones. They have either built in or external mics, usually with automatic recording levels. For some reason these machines usually need a special external mic which has two plugs, one for the sound and one to control the tape motor. They look like this:



The mini plug carries the sound signal, while the submini controls the motor; that is, when the mic is switched on, the tape will start, and when it's switched off, the tape stops. Some machines will have 5 pin sockets.

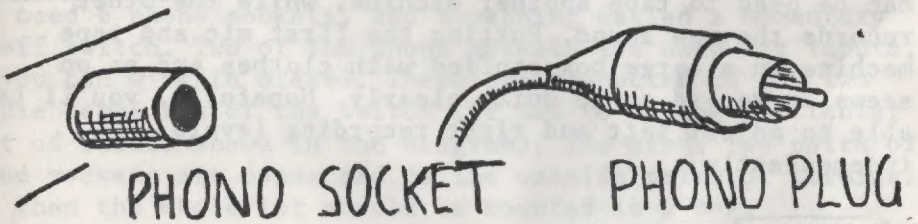
Mono with Radio. As above, except external mics will just have a mini plug. Lots of interesting noise on short wave.



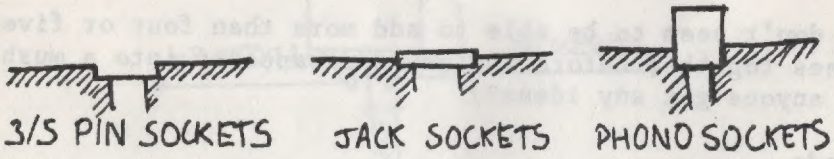


Stereo with Radio. As above, but while they have two built in mics, which will record in stereo, they sometimes only have one external mic socket, which means mono recordings and a 'flatter' sound.

Other Stuff: Portable Hifis, Stacks, Music Centres. These will have a combination of all the stuff mentioned so far, but might have two external mic sockets, with independently adjustable recording levels. Also present might be phono sockets, for phono plugs.



Unlike 3 or 5 pin sockets, which are recessed, or plug sockets, which are either flush or slightly raised, phono sockets stick out quite a bit (don't try and shove small/mini plugs into them).



Our music centre has four phono sockets, corresponding to the following signals: left in, left out, right in, right out. The neat thing about phonos is that signals fed in through them can be dubbed on top of whatever's going on in the music centre; but more of that later.

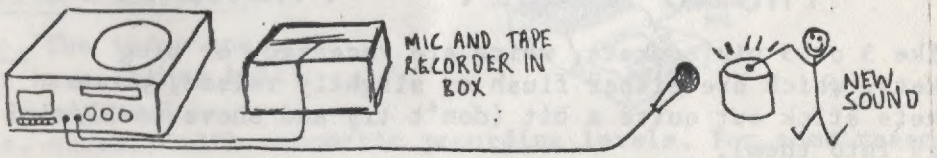
We haven't seen any stacks or portable hifis yet.

Recording.

Sussing things out is mainly a matter of trial and error, especially if you've got odd noises or clapped out equipment. For instance, we mentioned how to set recording levels to get the best results; but interesting sounds can be got by setting the levels too low, giving muffled and hissy sounds, or too high, giving all sorts of distortions, even on machines with automatic recording levels, and especially with cheapo mics and machines. Also, placing mics in boxes/crates, down tubes/ drainpipes, etc, alters how stuff is recorded.

Anyway, having recorded one noise, you can now add other noises/tunes/etc. There's several ways to do this:

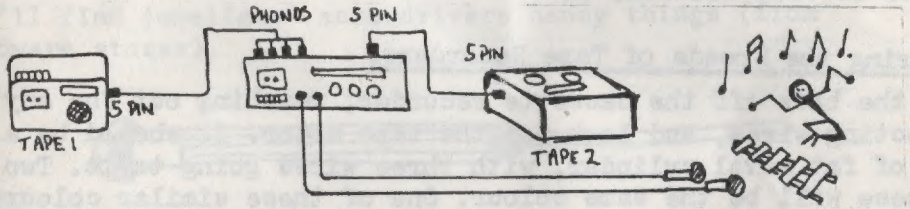
* Using two mono recorders. Play back the first tape through one machine, and record it on the second, adding the new sound in. Vary the distance of the first tape, and the new sound, from the second machine, to get different balances of sounds.
* Using a stereo and a mono machine, the played back sound and the new sound can be directed at different mics.
* Using a stereo machine with two external mics, one mic can be used to tape another machine, while the other records the new sound. Putting the first mic and tape machine in a large box stuffed with clothes and so on seems to record sound quite clearly. Hopefully, you'll be able to adjust left and right recording levels independently.



(We don't seem to be able to add more than four or five noises together before the sound disappears into a mush. Has anyone got any ideas?)

Using Leads.

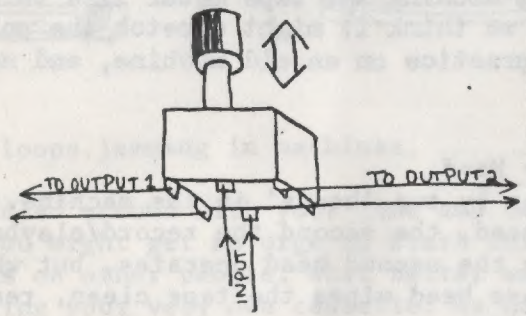
We don't know if this technique will work with any other machine. However, the music centre can be used as a very basic mixing thing. It works as follows: the first tape machine, with the recorded sounds, is connected to the music centre, using the 5 pin socket on the machine, and the phono sockets on the Music centre. The phono plugs have to be connected in the right order, which we think is black and yellow plugs to the input sockets, and red and white plugs to the output sockets. Keep swapping them around 'til you get something. The second tape machine is connected, through its 5 pin socket, to the 5 pin socket on the music centre. The second machine will now be able to record a mixture of what's going on in the first tape machine (e.g. already recorded sounds), and the music centre (e.g. radio noise). Further, by switching the music centres' tape deck on, plugging in the mics, and pressing the record button, what goes in through the mics will go through to the second machine. Phew. Well anyway it looks like this:



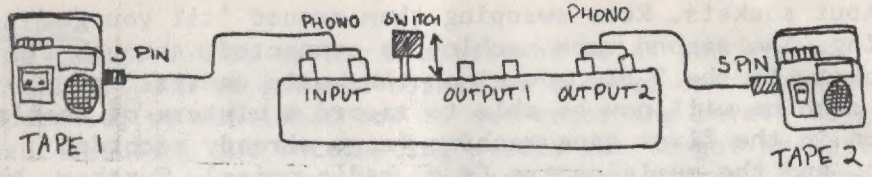
By adjusting the recording levels, we can alter the volume of what goes in through the mics.

Making Rhythms.

You need 6 phono sockets, and something called a momentary on/off switch. Two of the phono sockets are used for inputs, so you can work in stereo. These are connected to the two middle terminals of the switch (it has to be the particular sort of switch shown in the diagram). The other two pairs of phono sockets are connected to the outside pairs of terminals, and then the whole lot should be mounted in a box.



It's like a sort of morse buzzer arrangement. When you push the button down, the input signal is routed through one set of terminals; when you release it, it's routed to the other set of terminals. So, using leads to connect up two tape machines and the box, and playing a tape of constant noise (e.g. a low rumbling), you'll be able to tap out rhythms between one



machine and the other, which can be recorded. You can then, using the set up shown above for 'mixing' sounds, play the first rhythm in the music centre, pulse a new sound (e.g, FM hiss) between tape recorder 1 and the music centre, and record it all on tape recorder 2.

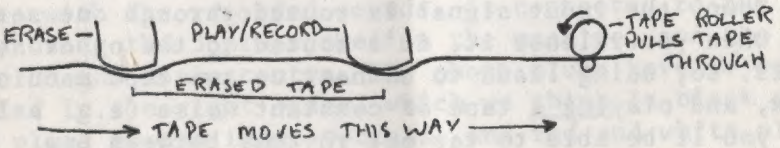
Altering the Speeds of Tape Recorders.

Take the back off the cassette recorder, watching out for any connecting wires, and look for the tape motor. It should be a sort of fat metal cylinder, with three wires going to it. Two of these will be the same colour. One of these similar coloured wires will have to be cut, extended out of the back of the machine, and have a 'pot' - a variable resistance (we think) - inserted. The maximum voltage the pot will have to cope with will be the same as the DC voltage printed on the back of the machine, or 1½ times the number of batteries it takes. When the pot is set to minimum, the tape shouldn't move; when it's set to maximum, it should move at full speed. But....you don't know which wire to cut, or which way round the pot ought to be connected. So you'll have to experiment. Does anyone know an easy way? (A good components shop will disentangle this explanation for you).

In our experience, abusing the tape motor like this tends to knacker it a bit: we think it might stretch the pulley belt or something. So practice on an old machine, and not someones ghetto blaster.

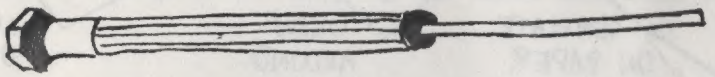
Removing the Erase Head.

Cassette tapes pass by two 'heads' in the machine. The first one is the erase head, the second the record/playback head. When playing, only the second head operates, but when recording, the erase head wipes the tape clean, ready for the recording to be made:



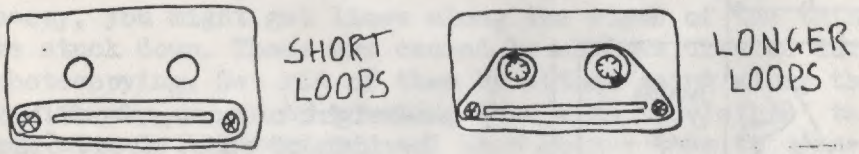
Removing the erase head thus has several advantages, allowing you to record sounds on top of one another. It's also useful for tape loops (see below) because otherwise, when you recorded your loop, the section of the tape between the erase and recording heads would always be blank.

Some erase heads can be removed by poking around through the front of the machine. Otherwise you'll have to take it's back off, remove the large screws holding the circuit board in and take the board out, and get at it that way. In any case, you'll find jewellers' screwdrivers handy things (from hardware stores).



Tape Loops.

You'll need a tape editing kit (£3/£4 from Smiths). Preferably you need some old, knackered cassettes, with screwed together cases. All you do is open up the cases, remove the spools, put a loop in (which you've made with the editing kit), and screw it back together. For longer loops, put the hubs back in:



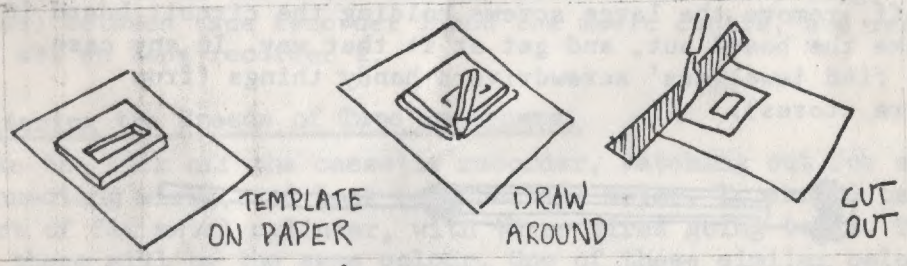
Watch out for loops jamming in machines.

So, having fiddled around with your junk and tape recorders for a while, you might get an urge to start inflicting these horrible noises on other people. What better way to do this than by releasing your very own cassette. We normally reckon that C60s are a decent length, working on the theory that half an hour at a time is the most anybody could be reasonably expected to listen to this sort of stuff. Once you've compiled your master tape, get some blanks and get copying. We try to avoid using cheap tapes, preferring TDK Ds, Sony HFSs or similar, so if someone doesn't like the music, they can always reuse the tape.

ARTWORK

Labels.

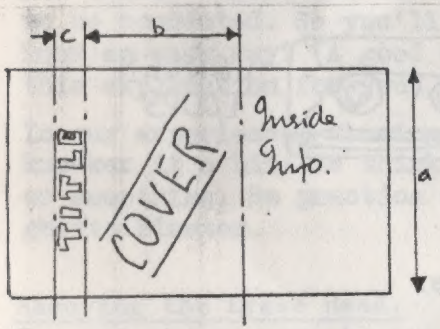
These can be made by glueing paper onto the cassette, by using gummed paper (coloured stuff is nice), or by cutting up large sticky address labels. If you usually use the same make of tape, and so have to cut out the same shaped labels, making a template is handy:



Scalpels (from art shops) are good for cutting out, using a straight edge (preferably metal) as a guide. And if you use gummed paper, it sticks better if you lick the object to which it is to be stuck, rather than the paper itself. Ughh.

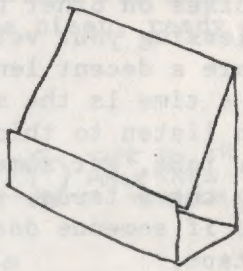
Inlay Cards.

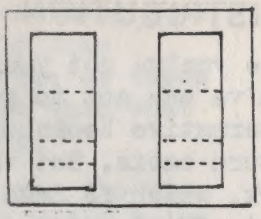
These are the cards which go in the cassette box. The format we've used so far is:



a=height of case, about 105mm
b=width of case, about 65mm
c=width of bottom of case, about 13mm

which, when folded, looks like this:





We get two inlays printed onto a sheet of A4 card at the local photocopy shop.

There's as many formats as you want to use, for example using large sheets of paper cleverly folded up if you want to include lyrics, info, etc. When folding card, mark where you want the folds to be on the back of the card, place it face down on another sheet of card, and run a blunt object, such as the end of a teaspoon handle, up and down the fold lines.

Photocopying.

The following will photocopy clearly: rotring pens, pentel/rolling ball pens, black felt tips and markers, other photocopies, typing, letraset, black paper, etc.
the following won't photocopy clearly: Newspaper cuttings, pencil, biro, coloured felt tips, colour pictures, anything not on a white background, fingerprints, tea stains, etc

Experiment until you get something you're happy with. When sticking stuff down, Pritt sticks are good. When you photocopy, you might get lines along the edges of the things you've stuck down. These are caused by shadows created during the photocopying. Get rid of them by either going along the edges with tip-ex, or by covering them with 'invisible' tape. You can also do big designs, and then reduce them to cassette size on a photocopier. It's easier to design things with more space. Photocopiers do two reduction ratios, 71% (A3 to A4), and (we think) 62%. Ask for the 71% reduction. So if you're aiming for a final size of 105mm x 65mm (front cover size), you can design at the following sizes and then reduce them.

STARTING SIZE	: NUMBER OF REDUCTIONS NEEDED
149 x 92mm	: 1
210 x 130mm	: 2
297 x 184mm	: 3
419 x 289mm	: 4

Every two reductions:
- reduces the lengths of the sides to half what they were
- reduces the area to one quarter of what it was.

DISTRIBUTION

Once you've got your tape made up, and done labels/inlays, you've now got to get rid of it. Friends might buy it, and alternative bookshops and, so on might take a few on a sale or return basis. But there's also an informal distribution network, which is dead handy. (What follows is why we think this sort of thing is a good idea - it's not why anyone else choose chooses to do it.)

Basically, there's people up and down the country who distribute different sorts of music through mail order lists. Tapes of all sorts of music can be had for around £1.50 for a C60, or £2 for a C90, which includes postage, and often includes booklets, artwork, etc. Get in contact to see if they're interested in doing anything with your tape. Also you should get together some flyers with your address and info on them to send out, these can get bunged in with all the stuff the distributors send out, so people get to know you exist. Also send info to fanzines etc, who'll probably give you a mention.

Finding out about distributors/musicians is a word of mouth process, so start writing to get things moving, and someone will tell you about someone else, who'll tell you about someone else, etc. You'll be amazed at what you get through the post. But as a lot of people doing this sort of stuff are pretty hard up, try and send a stamped addressed envelope wherever possible.

(Note: in the next, tidier, version of this we hope to include a list of distributors, so any suggestions are welcome. Perhaps sometime it would be possible to set up some form of contact list, organised by one or several groups, which would give listings of musicians/distributors addresses, types of music covered, etc. This would mean that there was somewhere definite to contact to get listed/get addresses from. Any ideas?)

We see some of the advantages of this way of communicating as being as follows:
* Music is 'cheap', as prices of tapes just cover the costs of materials involved. Thus the music involved hardly costs anything. In a straight comparison with the biz, we get 60 minute minutes of music for £1.50, rather than 40 minutes of music for £5.50. But such a comparison isn't really fair, as with diy tapes we're not being asked to expect or pay for any of the extras which the biz keeps telling us are totally necessary for the production of 'proper' music. And if we don't like the tape, we can always use it t record something else. From a musicians' point of view, we're completely free (apart from time limits) to do whatever we want to; so tapes contain what we think ought to be on them, rather than what CBS producers and executives think we ought to do.

Such is the variety of music available, and the way the biz either ignores or dismisses it, that most of the tapes we've got we'd never heard of before: but this situation cuts out our conditioned expectations/anticipations, and hopefully allows us to enjoy the tape for what it is, and not in the light of what 'critics' say about it. This state of mind is considerably enhanced by: trying as far as possible to ignore the music papers/TOTP/the Tube/Radio 1/etc; not going to rip-off gigs at the Top Rank or local 'alternative' nitespot; not frequenting megastores; etc. Again, this is where the low cost and re-usability of tapes comes in, with there being much less excuse not to buy something 'unknown' just because we feel we might be wasting our money. Indeed, to the contrary, we've made many interesting discoveries.

Further not only do musicians communicate directly with you without having to go through the biz, but you can communicate directly with them, exchange ideas, encourage, cooperate, advise, help, and so on, as well as realising how much you've got in common.

People get involved because they want to be, not because they want to make money, become famous, etc. And everyone can become involved, because everyone can do it, and do it with what they find around them. So (all together now):

Noprofessionalsnopriceygizmosnostudiosnoproducersnoexecutives nodesignconsultantsnoadvertisersnomarketersnomegastoresnofans nostarsnowatchersnowatched.

We do it for ourselves. APS 002

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Any criticisms (constructive), suggestions (on what's been left out, what should be left out, what's not clear, etc), hints, tips, contacts, etc, all greatly welcome. Ta.
Communications to:

APS,
BOX O, ACORN,
17 CHATHAM ST,
READING
BERKS,
UK

(SAE/IRC IF POSSIBLE)

OUTRODUCTION

The last bit. A few words to tie it all up. (If you're reading this bit first, it probably won't mean as much to you as if you'd read it last. So go back to the beginning and start there. Then you'll have something to look forward to.) In the end, of course, it doesn't really matter what you do, it's the spirit in which you do it that counts. We haven't set out to draw a line and say "this is good, do this" or "this is bad, don't do that", because such a task would be impossible and absurd. There's clever people with piles of equipment who are good people, and there are self-styled 'anti bizzers' who're just arseholes. It's all a question of how honest we are with ourselves over what we're doing and why we're doing it. We would suggest, though, that the further we get drawn into the biz, the more we imitate its power hungry behaviour, and the more we lose control of our own actions. But the choice is ours. In the end, though, we think the satisfaction will come as much from what we get out of what we're doing, as from any crumbling of supposed 'pillars of capitalism'.

Rave On!

P.S. Altho this was written some 2 years ago and there's a lot we'd change, we'd still appreciate criticism/comments. So if you've just finished reading this and feel strongly (either for/against) what we've said, make ~~your~~ yourself a cuppa tea and drop us a line. Don't put it off 'til tomorrow because it'll never get done that way. Ta.